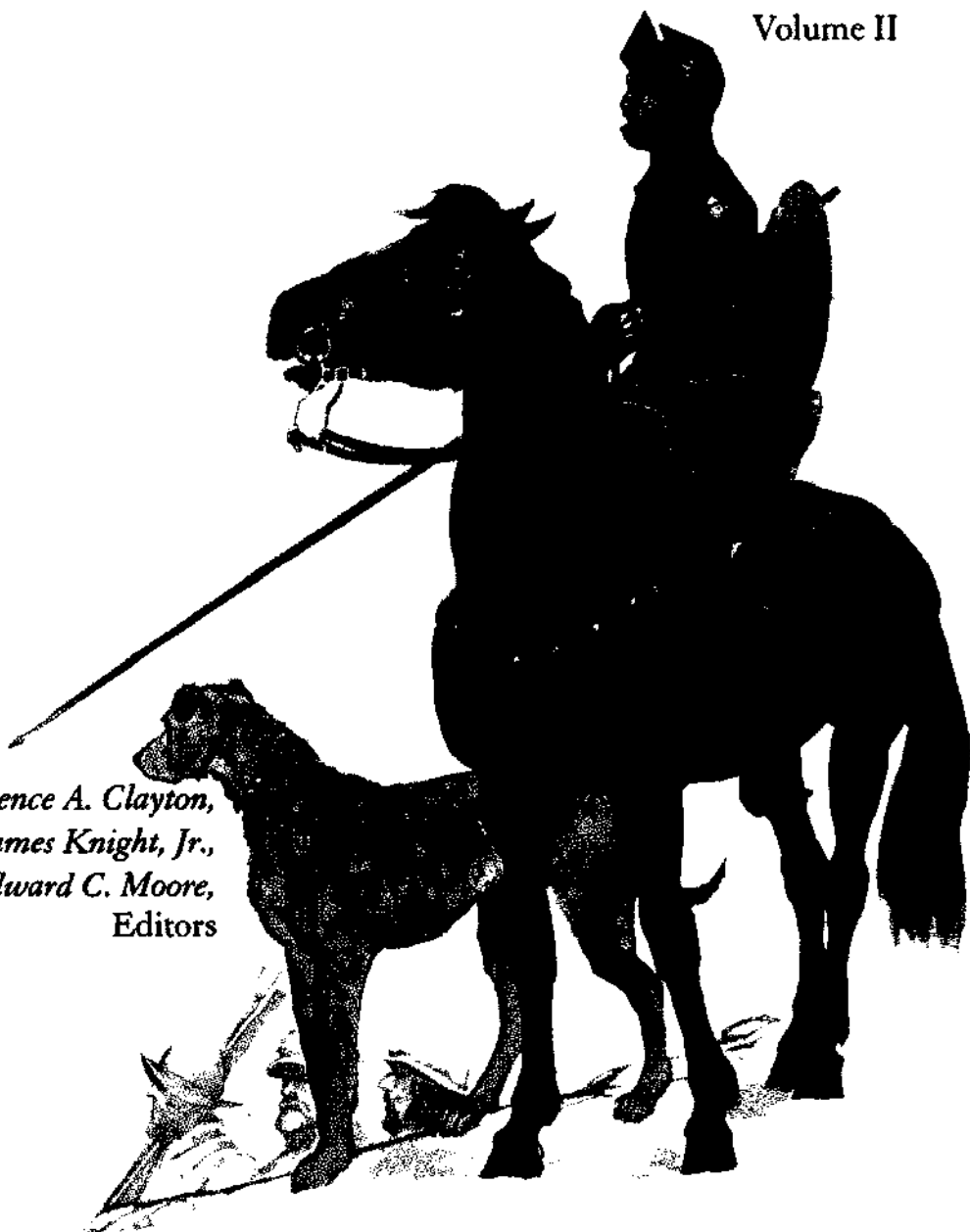


The De Soto Chronicles

The Expedition of Hernando de Soto
to North America in 1539-1543

Volume II

*Lawrence A. Clayton,
Vernon James Knight, Jr.,
and Edward C. Moore,
Editors*



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VOLUME II

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THE EXPEDITION OF HERNANDO

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DE SOTO TO NORTH AMERICA IN 1539-1543



EDITED BY

LAWRENCE A. CLAYTON

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Foreword

by Edward C. Moore

Of the four accounts of the De Soto expedition, *La Florida*, by Garcilaso de la Vega, is by far the longest and, with its commentary, occupies this entire volume. It is presented in a new translation, prepared originally by Charmion Shelby for the 1935 United States De Soto Expedition Commission but not published by them because of a lack of funds. It has been edited by David Bost, with notes by Vernon James Knight, Jr., and is introduced here by a biographical and critical essay, "Garcilaso de la Vega, the Inca" by Frances Crowley. We have added, as an appendix, the first English translation of the *Genealogy* of Garcilaso, which will be of much interest to Garcilaso scholars and to those interested in Hispanic-American genealogies.

Although *La Florida* is usually described as "Garcilaso's account," this is misleading. Garcilaso himself never saw North America. This account is Garcilaso's recording of what he was told—some forty to fifty years later—by a soldier who was on the expedition. Almost certainly his source was Captain Gonzalo Silvestre, who served with the expedition, who may or may not have had notes of his experiences on the expedition, and who undoubtedly told the account with the flourishes and embellishments of an old soldier reminiscing about an earlier period in his life. In Garcilaso's rendering of Silvestre's tale, literary liberties were often taken at the expense of historical accuracy.

However, W. H. Prescott, author of the great histories of the Spanish conquests in Peru and Mexico, once wrote about historiography: "Truth does not come from a single source." This is, indeed, the case with the four accounts of the De Soto expedition. But since the time of John Swanton's *Report* in 1939 it has been the custom to speak in a derogatory fashion about the account by Garcilaso. I think this is a mistake. Taken as adventure, the De Soto expedition can be compared to the experiences of Odysseus or El Cid, and to those described in the Song of Roland. What Garcilaso is describing here is a great exploration, not only of a continent, but also of the

strengths of the human spirit in the face of tribulations of a magnitude that occur but rarely in human history.

Aristotle tells us that "science give us less truth but gives it more exactly; art gives us more truth but gives it less exactly." The account by Garcilaso is great art in that sense. It tells us more about what truly happened on the expedition than does any other account, even though it may tell it less exactly. The accuracy of Garcilaso's account has come under review primarily because he does not always agree with the other three accounts—but then they do not always agree with one another, either.

In Garcilaso, De Soto found his Homer. For readers who love a good, true adventure yarn, this account is one of the great literary classics—and, incidentally, our first American literary classic.

It has also been the custom to raise some questions about Garcilaso's motives in writing his account. Probably he had many motives. He was an author. To live, he had to write books that people would buy. Did he want to please his old friend, who told him the story, by describing his friend's leader, De Soto, in a favorable light? Possibly. Being a part Indian of Peru, did he want to vindicate the courage and resistance to the invader of the Indians of La Florida? Probably. Did he elaborate in telling some of the incidents or borrow them from stories about other expeditions? Perhaps. But did he give us the most fascinating of all looks at life on our continent before the white man came and changed it all? Certainly.

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